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AUTHOR Noboa, Abdin
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ABSTRACT

There is little analytic literature on the education of the Puerto Rican, in general, and data on the present higher education crisis are especially lacking. There is also a lack of direction as to the purpose or programmatic consequences of higher education for Puerto Ricans. It is clear, however, that Puerto Ricans are at a profound disadvantage at all levels of postsecondary education. In terms of college enrollment, Puerto Ricans are drastically underrepresented, even in comparison to other Hispanic groups, and the situation is even worse in graduate education. In a system of meritocracy, where occupational advancement depends on educational attainment, the consequences of Puerto Rican underrepresentation in higher education programs are serious. Among the barriers impinging on advancement of Puerto Ricans are: (1) institutional barriers, such as recruitment, admission standards, financial aid, student support services, student participation in the educational process, inaccessibility of facilities, and problems in the cultural orientation of staff and curriculum; (2) students' personal needs and problems, such as alienation, negative expectations, lack of role models, motivational barriers, financial resources, cognitive style differences, and poor educational preparation; and (3) problems in community and family support systems. (Author/GC)

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ISSUES AND PROBLEMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION AS THEY RELATE TO PUERTO RICANS: TOWARD A CONCEPTUAL APPROACH*

ABDIN NOBOA

NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS
OF THE PUERTO RICAN
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Introduction

Although documentation on the Spanish Speaking elementary and secondary education phenomenoa is sparce, and a series of hypotheses have been generated as to principal causes for exceedingly high H.S. dropout rates, little attention has been given to the expansion of secondary education studies into the area of post-secondary education, i.e. higher education. It is important to look at the student who is struggling through the college and graduate school system, as well as provide a thorough examination of the higher education system itself. Important correlates between post-secondary education and high school education may produce a more integrated perspective of the Puerto Rican schooling phenomenon in this country and perhaps point to more significant variables which may yield distinctions in both achievement and educational attainment among Puerto Ricans. Such efforts may also serve to minimize the pervasive "deficiency theories" which permeate elementary and secondary school literature.

Despite the publication of educational statistics on Puerto Ricans the last decade, there is a paucity of analytic literature on the education of the Puerto Rican, and an obvious lack of accurate data on the present higher education crisis. Published reports, surveys, and studies in this area are highly statistical in orientation and confounded in research methodology. Publications in post-secondary education, vis-a-vis the Puert Rican, have incorporated aggregate data on the Spanish Speaking, which in addition to being highly suspect in design, do not differentiate among the varicus Hispano groups, e.g. Cubans, Chicanos, and Puerto Ricans. Furthermore, these

questionable estimates are only available since the late 60's.

On another realm, there seems to be a lack of direction as to the general purpose of higher education, or even sufficient knowledge of programmatic consequences of higher education among Puerto Ricans. We have yet to scratch the surface as to what works, or does not work, in higher education. We are gradually awakening to the reality in this area but at a loss as to the implementation of viable strategies toward systematically rectifying this dilemma.

These reasons alone would suffice for intensive investigation, exploration, and critical synthesis of the effects of higher education and the Puerto Rican; but much moreso when our culture is aversely oppressed by its stygmatized 'lack of education'.

Problem Overview

No other American minority is less represented in American higher education than the nearly 12 million Spanish-speaking members of American Society.[1] Although we constitute over 5% of the total U.S. population,[2] Hispanos presently account for only 2.1% of the total undergraduate population (1970)[3], 1.1% of the graduate school enrollment (1973)[4], and only 0.9% of the Ph.D. recipients (1973).[5]

To reach population parity, Hispanos would have to almost triple present undergraduate enrollment overnight, more than quadruple graduate enrollment, and certainly increase the number of Ph.D.'s sixfold.

But the above picture is decidedly worse for Puerto Ricans. A state by state analysis of the summary yields statistics far worse on a regional distribution than is at first evident. Simple statistical

interpretation indicates a higher concentration of degree and enrollment figures for the Southwestern states and Florida (while controlling for population concentration) than states with greater Puerto Rican populations. Although the number of Puerto Rican undergraduate enrollment has greatly increased, primarily due to the advent of open enrollment, college dropout statistics are now over 70% by the senior year. There is enough short term longitudinal data, to indicate that college retention has greatly suffered due to high numbers of enrollees through open enrollment. This is not to negate the effects of open enrollment, since greater numbers of Puerto Rican students do remain in college than before; it does point out, however, the glaring fact that student support systems are needed after entry to college. We must bear in mind that while Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, and Blacks have nearly tripled enrollment since 1960, the general college population has equally increased its total enrollment, maintaining previous gaps. Ford Foundation's recent report, Minority Enrollment and Education in Institutions of Higher Education, emphasized that "Although there has been progress in the absolute amount of education received by both Whites and minority group members from 1960 to 1970, the relative position of minority groups shows little change" (p. iv). In fact, latest indices are indicating that minority enrollment in college is again decreasing, especially among community colleges.

As for graduate education, the number of Puerto Rican Ph.D. recipients in 1973, based on 80% of the 1973 Ph.D.'s awarded, is thirty-seven (twenty-two reside in Puerto Rico) out of 27,227 respondents (97% response rate). Although percentages can be derived from various sources and extrapolated in numerous ways, relative differences are not

significantly altered.

To graphically illustrate present Puerto Rican trends in higher education, let us hypothetically construct a representative sample of 1,000 Puerto Rican students in elementary school and follow them through their educational career in accordance with present educational trends. From this population, we would first discover that approximately 400 students would receive high school diplomas or equivalent. This group would generate (at most) some 225 enrollees in institutions of higher education (primarily two year colleges), out of which only 57 would graduate from four year institutions. Of this group, approximately 11 would continue on to graduate school with little likelihood that any of the eleven will receive a Ph.D. If equitable population representation of Puerto Ricans existed at the Ph.D. level, no less than 109 mainland Puerto Ricans would receive doctorates, yearly. (Derivations for the above statistics were based on statistical calculations from five different national surveys (1970-73). For the purposes of this report, the author will not reproduce these calculations.)

Statistics are meaningless, devoid of the cultural context in which they exist. A general composite of the typical Puerto Rican student in higher education, gleaned from several readings, suggests the following portrait:

Sex: male
Income: low SES
Age: older than average student
Birth order: firstborn
Year in College: lower division (first or second year)
Type of School: public community college
Transp: commutes to school daily
Aid: receiving financial assistance, also work part-time
Major: social science, education or humanities.

I have estimated on the bases of Census Bureau population characteristics and the DHEW, Office of Civil Rights Survey (1970) that not more

than 17,000 Puerto Rican students are enrolled in public and private, two and four year colleges and universities in the U.S. Most of these students are enrolled in community colleges and are quite representative of the portrait above.

Significance of Higher Education

Education is the single most important occupation of the majority of Americans. At least 60 million Americans are involved in the educational process daily, be they administrators, teachers or students. Education is a major and ever growing enterprise. The decade of the sixties brought forth explosive growth in American higher education. Total enrollment in institutions of higher education rose from 3.8 million in 1960 to over 8.5 million in 1970. The upward trend in graduate enrollment is even greater.[7]

In a system of meritocracy, where the entrance to an occupation hinges on an ever escalating series of educational hurdles based on the majority society's set of entry level expectations and qualifications, a culturally distinct group, such as ours, faces the difficult task of competing on sets of standards totally alien to our experience. Failure in such a system reinforces societal expectations; success makes us exceptionally different and sometimes leads to an external redefinition of ourselves, at the expense, sometimes, of our proper selfhood. This double dilemma is no different in post-secondary education as it is in elementary and secondary education. The questions are: Where do we go from here? and How do we continue to redefine our educational experience?

A rightful fear is that the academic institutions we face may change us more than we change them. A Chicano recently expressed this

internal agony in an eloquent literary essay entitled, "The new American Scholarship Boy."

> "While minority groups had an impact on higher education, largely because of their advantage in coming as a group, within the last few years, students, such as myself, who finally ended up certified as academics, also ended up sounding very much like the academics we found when we came to the campus. I do not enjoy making such admissions. But perhaps now the time has come when questions about the cultural costs of education ought to be delayed no longer. Those of us who have been scholarship boys know in our bones that our education has exacted a large price in exchange for the large benefits it has conferred upon us. And what is sadder to consider, after we have paid that price, we go home and casually change the cultures that murtured us. My parents today understand how they are 'Chicanos' in a large and impersonal sense. The gains from such knowledge are clear. But so, too, are the reasons for regret."

I hope we can profit from his experience. What I mean to say is that if present higher education systems are pathological models, then it is up to us to come up with an alternative. With this as a challenge, I am now prepared to address specific issues in higher education.

Barriers to Higher Education

Numerous barriers impinge on the advancement of Puerto Ricans into higher education. These influences primarily rest on the lack of support services in the educational institutions serving our students, the quality of education delivered, local community and family influences, as well as unmet personal needs of the student. When the above subsystems strongly support student opportunities, the likelihood of school failure is lessened. Our emphasis is on specific barriers within these subsystems, primarily the first two, which minimize higher education opportunities for Puerto Rican students interested in pursuing higher education degress.

INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS

1. Recruitment

   Inadequate or misguided recruitment efforts, racist recruiment standards, and improper recruitment presonnel dominate recruitment in higher education.

2. Admission Standards

   Admission standards rigidly based on standardized tests, grade point averages (GPA's), and other similar criteria negate accessibility to students who may otherwise qualify in areas not easily measured by standardized instruments.

3. Financial Aid

   Limited assistance to needed students, improper justifications for financial aid clearance, exorbitant tuition costs, and minimum work study opportunities all jeopardize financial opportunities for students with limited resources.

4. Student Support Services

   Inadequate guidance counseling, limited tutoring services, lack of truly innovative programs geared toward Puerto Rican students, which need not be remedial in scope, severely alienate Puerto Ricans in higher education.

5. Student Participation

Limited student participation in the educational process, whether at the decision-making level or not, forfeits Puerto Rican students the opportunity to be actively involved in their educational experience.

6. Distance Barrier

Unavailability of school facilities to local students as well as the physical distance from the home to the school creates an important barrier to regular school attendance. Studies indicate that proximity of school to home enhances enrollment.

7. Curriculum Development

Lack of needed resource materials as well as inadequate and irrelevant curriculum materials impairs the quality of education afforded our students.

8. Staff Composition

Puerto Rican under-representation at all levels of higher education, professional and non-professional (including public health and maintenance workers), undermines the role of the Puerto Rican in higher education (see CUNY Yearly Statistical Report).

9. Staff Sensitivity

Lack of knowledge, interest, or sensitivity to the needs of the culturally distinct exists at both the faculty and administration level.

10. Puerto Rican Studies

Puerto Rican Studies operate from an oppressed position lacking legitimacy and power from which to operate. These departments have been used as the panacea and scapegoat for the academic ills of the Puerto Rican student.

11. Enforcement mechanisms

Enforcement mechanisms to existing legislation, such as, Title VI of the HEW Civil Rights Act, have not been sufficiently exercised against institutions which continually discriminate against particular classes of students despite the history of legislation forbidding the same.

STUDENT NEEDS

1. Student Alienation

Lack of sufficient ethnic peers with which to relate many times leads the student to intolerable peer group relationships, or worse, a mistaken self-identity based on an alien and distant peer group.

2. Negative Expectations

Prior misapprehensions (many times based on misinformation) toward the higher education experience can easily lead to self-fulfulling prophecies and discordant personal expectations of the schooling process.

3. Role Models

Lack of role models within the higher education system limits the students's horizons of "making it" through a seemingly impenetrable system.

4. Motivational Barriers

Irrelevant course work, discordance between the school and the home, and differing value orientations toward learning success and acheivement, dampen motivational attitudes.

5. Financial Resources

Financial responsibilities in light of available emplyment opportunities conflict with college opportunities.

6. High School Preparation

Poor and inadequate secondary school preparation hinders levels of achievement at competitive undergraduate schools.

7. Cognitive Styles

Linguistic and/or cultural differences create dissonance for the Puerto Rican student submerged in an Anglo milieu.

8. Dropouts

Exceedingly high rates of secondary school defectors grossly curtail higher education enrollment.

COMMUNITY AND FAMILY SUPPORT SYSTEMS

1. Family Support

Overbearing household responsibilities and family expectations, especially as they pertain to Puerto Rican females, greatly limit entrance into institutions of higher education.

2. Community Educational Services

Limited community-based educational supportive and guidance services minimally reinforce the undergraduate experience.

3. Migration

Frequency of migration, mobility (transiency) and continuity (or discontinuity) of education as a result of Island and U.S.

migration, hinders advancement into proper grade levels.

Recommendations

Suggested recommendations by this author would be obvious derivations of the above critique. It is no magic that solutions are usually inherent in the very problems exposed. Useful recommendations, however, must be based on strategies which can be economically implemented and concurrent with the actual reality of the Puerto Rican educational experience.

National-scale strategies, although necessary, must be properly designed and administrated to systematically include local community input in concert with specific national goals. These must be aimed at the improvement of educational options for all Puerto Ricans.

It is the aim of this author to develop viable recommendations in dialogue with the workshop process so as not to target specific suggestions which may inevitably orient the panelists in predetermined directions. I have, therefore, presented general problems through extant barriers to higher education and now invite discussion toward specific recommendations on the problems presented.

FOOTNOTES

(1) Federal Interagency Task Force on Education (FICE), "The Task Force Report on Higher Education for Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, and American Indians," (Washington, D.C.: Unpublished Report, 1973).

(2) U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Population Characteristics - Persons of Spanish Origin in the United States: March 1973 (advance report) (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1974).

(3) The Ford Foundation, Minority Enrollment and Representation in Institutions of Higher Education (New York City: Ford Foundation, 1974), p. 36.

(4) Elaine El-Khawas and Joan L. Kinzer, Enrollment of Minority Graduate Students at Ph.D. Granting Institutions (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1974), p. 3.

(5) National Academy of Sciences, Commission on Human Resources, National Research Council, Summary Report 1973: Doctorate Recipients from United States Universities (Washington, D.C.: 1974), p.4.

(6) Ibid., p. 4.

(7) Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, New Students and New Places: Policies for the future growth and Development of American Higher Education (New York City: McGraw Hill, 1971), p. 11.

(8) Richard Rodríguez, "Going Home Again: the New American Scholarship Boy" (Berkeley, California: Wright Institute, 1973), p. 28.